DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 029 CS 206 027

AUTHOR Casey, Mara
TITLE Respect for the Language Teacher as Learner: A Model of Inservice Training in Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education and the Secondary School English Conference (Pittsburgh, PA, March 15-18, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Change Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Improvement; *Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Before teachers who trust neither their own nor their students' writing abilities can become proud and self-confident teachers of writing, they need redevelopment in a longterm inservice program based on the trainer's respect for them as learners. The format for such a course is simple: teachers write each week (choosing their own subjects and forms), bring in dittoed copies of their work, read it aloud, and give each other feedback; the trainer writes, too, in order to build the needed trust and to encourage the teachers to write along with their own students. The course, 15 two-to-three-hour sessions, has worked equally well for elementary, junior high, and high school teachers of many subject areas. The principles on which the course is founded are as follows: (1) the learner must be actively involved, (2) that which is learned must touch the self, (3) the person who facilitates the learning must be authentic and accepting, (4) the learning should involve a memorable insight, (5) the facilitator assumes and draws upon the previous knowledge of the learner, and (6) learning involves interpersonal relations. Work in the course helps teachers progress through six learning stages that delineate a changing attitude toward themselves as writers, toward their students as writers, and toward the conditions that produce effective writing instruction. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED196029

RESPECT FOR THE LANGUAGE TEACHER AS LEARNER: A MODEL OF INSERVICE TRAINING IN WRITING

Presentation at the 1979 Conference on English Education and Secondary School English, Pittsburgh, PA, March 15-18, 1979

Copyright © the Arizona English Bulletin (April 1981)

Mara Casey
Inservice Training Consultant, Cambridge, MA

As NCTE President Yetta Goodman said in her inaugural address, students' mastery of language "must be built on a base of pride and self-confidence in each learner which can come from their perceiving our respect for them." And, Erich Fromm tells us, "to respect a person is not possible without knowing him." (p. 101)

The burden of improving student writing, then, is the teacher's, much as we, like the participants in this conference's two-day writing workshop, try to pass the buck. Asked to brainstorm why students have a hard time writing, they produced the stock answers: "THEY are ignorant"; "THEY don't know anything"; "THEY can't organize"; "THEY can't internalize the process." Cheerfully, these English educators and secondary English teachers absolved themselves of responsibility, despite the empirically established relationship between teachers' language ability and their students' (Weaver, p. 567), and ample evidence that "the beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of teachers are the air of a learning environment; they determine the quality of life within it." (Postman and Weingartner, p. 33).

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mara Casey
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CS206027

Teachers with such disrespect for their students' learning capacity cannot be effective teachers of writing. It is unreasonable, however, to expect them to respect students when preservice and inservice trainers too often have not taught them to respect themselves as learners. They are casualties of preservice which has trained them neither to write clearly, nor to evaluate writing, nor to recognize the need to know their students and write with them.

No wonder many teachers lack pride and confidence in themselves and their students as learners when the typical inservice program in writing is a one-shot lecture/demonstration by an outside expert who tells teachers what they are doing wrong, tells them what to do, and leaves them feeling angry, inadequate, and confused by still another cure-all for illiteracy. This insulting approach encourages passivity, dependence on authority, and the false notion that teaching means pouring information into empty heads. We see its victims, throwing themselves upon publishers' representatives at these conventions, with the desperate plea, "Give me everything you've got on composition."

Before teachers who trust neither their own nor their students' writing ability can become proud and self-confident teachers of writing, therefore, they need redevelopment in a long-term inservice program based on the trainer's respect for them as learners. Participation in a course like the one I am about to describe proves to teachers that "writing and reading competencies are heavily influenced by attitudes; a change in motivation can prompt major changes in competency"--their

own and their students'. (Winterowd and Lloyd-Jones, p. 44)

This student-centered course, based on Peter Elbow's model of the teacherless writing class, can release teachers' learning potential, transforming them into facilitators of their students' learning, instead of impediments to it. "When the teacher assumes new functions and exhibits different behaviors," Postman and Weingartner observe, "so do his students." (p. 38) When teachers begin to think of themselves as writers, so do their students.

The format of the course is simple: teachers write each week, choosing their own subjects and forms, bring in dittoed copies of their work, read it aloud, and give each other feedback; I write, too, in order to build the needed trust and to encourage them to write along with their own students. I have given the course, usually for 15 weekly, two-three hour sessions in Watertown, Worcester, Williamstown, Chelmsford, Acton, Chelsea, Reading, Lenox, North Adams, and Fitchburg. It has worked equally well for groups of elementary teachers (including kindergarten, first grade, reading, music, social studies, Title I, generic specialists, and special needs teachers), groups of secondary English teachers, a group of junior high teachers (English, social studies, math, industrial arts, home economics, the principal, guidance counselor, and school secretary), and mixed groups of elementary, junior high, and high school teachers (including social studies, science, music, reading specialists, special needs teachers, and guidance counselors). In all but three instances, the department head, director of English, language arts coordinator, principal, or assistant superintendent also participated.

Describing the dynamics of a process-centered course is difficult, if not impossible; sceptical teachers need to discover for themselves that improving their writing will make them and their students self-confident and competent language learners. Significant learning--described by Carl Rogers as that which changes attitudes and behavior--must be self-discovered and self-appropriated; it cannot be communicated directly. And Chelmsford teachers, who became very enthusiastic about the course, told me later they were glad they went into it cold;watching another group wouldn't have eased their fears about enrolling, they said.

When teachers do have the courage to take the course, they become more empathic, like Sophie Schneer of Williamstown: "It had never occurred to me that it might be desirable to write along with my students. When it did, I had to overcome a great reluctance stemming from anxiety. How would my writing bear up under fourth grade scrutiny? However, after writing for this class, I am as brave as I have come to realize my fourth graders are every time they sit down to write."

If the course is successful--if, by establishing a personal relationship with the teachers, I can create an environment which redevelops them--they conclude that students can and will write in a classroom where "challenge is present but trauma is not, . . . a place in which self discovery is more highly regarded than production; . . . a place of encouragement, support, honesty, safety." (Levinger, p. 28) Because "the process of learning to write well is fundamentally interactive, a dialogue between teacher and taught," (Sizer, p.65) the teacher must open this dialogue by writing along with students.

The assumptions underlying the course are neither new nor original, but, remarkably, most teachers, even very good ones, have never heard them before. The experience of Kathy Delaney, a junior high English teacher in Watertown, is typical: "Many of the ideas proposed in the course were just common sense, and, consequently, I had often neglected them in my teaching." Her classmate, elementary school teacher Ellen Cone, learned "writing is meant to be shared. This simple, logical concept had never been discussed in any of my teacher training courses." Such omissions suggest that Peter Medway's conclusion in From Talking to Writing that "'far from failing (despite valiant efforts) to get children to achieve something difficult, we are unwittingly stopping them from doing something easy'" (p.9) may also apply to the way writing is taught in this country. Medway found "writing tasks set by teachers of school subjects rarely carried the child forward, nor were they seen to have any 'purpose' other than reciting what was already known." (Applebee, p.84)

Designed to correct these obstacles teachers unwillingly erect for language learners, as well as the widespread incongruity between most classroom practices and modern principles of learning (Kohl, p. 173), my course is based on concepts taken from Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Rollo May, James Moffett, Donald Murray, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, and Carl Rogers, as well as the following characteristics of environments which facilitate learning (Barbour and Goldberg, p.49):

1. THE LEARNER MUST BE ACTIVELY INVOLVED. Through practicing all the language arts--writing each week on subjects they know and

care about, reading their writing aloud, listening, and giving and receiving feedback--teachers apprehend that an effective writing curriculum is based on: the teacher's and students' understanding that writing is a process of discovery; the teacher's respect for the individual; opportunities for publication of teacher and student writing, and the teacher's and the students' realization that failure is both necessary and valuable in the writing classroom. (Murray, 1973, pp. 1234-7)

2. THAT WHICH IS LEARNED MUST TOUCH THE SELF. Although the process remains constant, the content of the course comes from the participants. When teachers are given freedom to choose their own subjects, they see that "students who are in real contact with problems which are relevant to them wish to learn." (Rogers, 1969, p. 114)
3. THE PERSON WHO FACILITATES THE LEARNING MUST BE AUTHENTIC AND ACCEPTING. I respect the teachers enough to share my writing and to accept their feedback. "We would not communicate," Rollo May asserts, "unless we valued the other, considered him worth talking to, worth the effort to make our ideas clear. . . Communication leads to community--that is, to understanding, intimacy, and the mutual valuing that was previously lacking." (p. 247) The increased respect shown by teachers when their department head, curriculum coordinator, or principal also makes him/herself vulnerable by taking the course emphasizes that students won't

value and respect us enough to want to reach us with honest writing, unless we value and respect them enough to want to reach them.

4. THE LEARNING SHOULD INVOLVE A MEMORABLE INSIGHT. Amazed by the quality and variety when they are trusted to choose their own subjects, teachers invariably ask after the first class, "Is the writing always this good in your other courses?" They are ready to believe students can write when the teacher and the environment facilitate self-discovery.

5. THE FACILITATOR ASSUMES AND DRAWS UPON THE PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE OF THE LEARNER. Because I believe the teachers can write, they do--at their own pace. And because I also trust their ability to implement what they are learning in their own classrooms, they do so, as Joann Eldridge, a high school English teacher in Worcester, describes: "I have learned a technique of how to teach an unteachable course--writing. This technique is valuable to me because it fits into me, and I have, since day one of the course, adapted it to my style, my personality, in the classroom."

6. LEARNING INVOLVES INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS. Teachers learn that, as Larry Levinger says, "the writing problem is at heart a problem in human relationship, an unwillingness to be ourselves, an inability to participate honestly in personal and interpersonal relationship." (p.29) They also discover for themselves that "in an understanding classroom environment where the teacher is more

empathic, every student tends to feel liked by all the others, to have a more positive attitude toward himself and toward school." (Rogers, 1969, p. 119) Not surprisingly, the Massachusetts Assessment of Student Performance in Writing, 1975-1976, found students who had positive attitudes towards school and who perceived their schools as friendly places performed better on writing tasks than students with negative attitudes.

In giving an overview of this course, I don't want to imply that improving one's writing and letting go of non-facilitating attitudes is anything but a long, frustrating, and difficult undertaking for both trainer and teachers. Writing is an "organic, developmental process," characterized by frequently invisible progress, regression, and unexpected leaps forward, not the "orderly, hierarchical progression" implied by many curricula. (Elbow, p. 108, p. 136) Therefore, although the process of relinquishing old perceptions of self and others and replacing them with more realistic ones does not occur as neatly in the course itself as it does in the following outline, I have isolated the learning stages in order to explain why, and how, I think student writing improves when their teachers take this kind of course:

1. Teachers are fearful, sometimes hostile, and usually sceptical about how a simple format of writing and sharing writing will help them in the classroom. My respect for them gradually creates a nurturing environment which tends to convince them that "the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal

qualities"--genuineness, trust, empathy--"which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner." (Rogers, 1969, p. 106) Sharon Cinsavich, a fifth grade teacher in Chelmsford, characterizes this stage: "The first reading seemed terrifying; my heart was pounding, and a cold sweat enveloped me. Support from the class helped to develop a nurturing environment which gave me a more comfortable feeling."

2. As they receive positive response to their writing, teachers begin trusting their ability to write and to evaluate writing; as the authors of Hooked on Books found: "If literacy feels bad, we must improve its feeling before we can accomplish any meaningful training at all." (McNeil, p. 207) Julie Murphy, a junior high English teacher in Watertown, told me: "We probably learned as much from one another as from you. The give and take, which you encouraged, gave many of us--particularly me--a greater sense of self-worth."
3. Knowing they will not be ridiculed, teachers begin to enjoy writing and listening to their colleagues' writing. When they start respecting themselves and their audience enough to reveal their authentic voice, their writing gets clearer and stronger, as Chelmsford first grade teacher Ellen Simorellis reports: "Because of the very positive atmosphere. . . I was eventually to get over the nagging feeling that what I had to say in my writing was unimportant. I discovered I did have something to

communicate and that I could and would be able to express my ideas. . . I became less inhibited and more trusting of my audience."

4. Empirical proof that they and their colleagues can write encourages teachers to believe students can write under similar conditions. Jane McDonald of Chelmsford explains: "My enthusiasm for our writing class enabled me to use the technique in my own junior high English classes. I was actually shocked to see how much my children wrote and how freely they expressed themselves when they got to choose their own subjects."

5. Classroom tension decreases, teachers enjoy teaching writing, and students begin changing their attitudes towards themselves as writers, again supporting the experience of the Hooked on Books experiment: "If how they feel about reading and writing can be nudged into a new posture, we may have achieved the stance needed to move their whole outlook on the world. Once a child stops fighting the system, he can divert his energy into making it work for him." (p. 207) This seems to have happened in Everett Nau's junior high English classes in Watertown: "I have modeled my writing classes after our course with tremendous results, especially with 'low-ability' students. They have attempted a larger variety of topics than before. They seem to be more aware of their environment and have come to realize that they have the power to communicate their feelings about it to others."

6. With enough time and encouragement, students find their authentic voice, resulting in better writing and more enjoyable classes for everyone. "Best of all," relates Susan Cole, a former resource room teacher at Watertown High School, "the changes in me have come across naturally to my students. Having students read out loud encourages them to respect their work and the work of others. They seem to revel in hearing a response from their peers. I like writing with them and they're seeing me in a new light--not as a superior with all the answers but as a fellow on the same quest. Writing in class has become a new, more energizing experience for us all."

I agree with Esther Rothman that "most teachers can be good teachers, because most people have within them the capacity to find their real selves. What they have not learned is how to find that capacity." (p.20)

The teacherless inservice writing course helps give teachers this capacity. "The course showed me I could write," Julie Murphy reported a year later. "If I can do it, I feel better about teaching my kids."

Works Cited

Barbour, Alton and Alvin A. Goldberg. Interpersonal Communication: Teaching Strategies and Resources. Urbana, Illinois: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1974.

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Fader, Daniel N. and Elton B. McNeil. Hooked on Books: Program and Proof. New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1968.

Fromm, Erich. Man For Himself. New York: Rinehart, 1947.

Kohl, Herbert. On Teaching. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.

Levinger, Larry. "The Human Side of Illiteracy," English Journal, 67 (November 1978), 26-29.

Macrorie, Ken. Telling Writing. Rochelle, Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1976.

May, Rollo, Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972.

Medway, Peter. From Talking To Writing. Writing Across the Curriculum Project. London: Institute of Education, 1973, in Arthur N. Applebee, "Writing Across the Curriculum: The London Projects," English Journal, 66 (December 1977), 81-85.

Moffett, James. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

Murray, Donald M. A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968.

Murray, Donald M. "Why Teach Writing--and How?" English Journal, 62 (December 1973), 1234-7.

Postman, Neil and Charles Weingartner. Teaching as a Subversive Activity. New York: Delta Books, 1969.

Rogers, Carl. Client-Centered Therapy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965.

Rogers, Carl. Freedom To Learn. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.

Rothman, Esther P. Troubled Teachers. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977.

Sizer, Theodore R. "Some Comments from the Field" in James D. Koerner, ed., The Teaching of Expository Writing. An Exchange of Views. New York: Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 1977.

Weaver, W. Timothy. "Educators in Supply and Demand: Effects on Quality," School Review, 86 (August 1978), 552-593.

Winterowd, W. Ross and Richard Lloyd-Jones. "What Might This Mean?" Writing Mechanics, 1969-1974: A Capsule Description of Changes in Writing Mechanics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975.